# THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

# Why I'm Still a Presbyterian

## October 31, 1999

## John M. Buchanan

We are consecrated and dedicated to God in order that we may thereafter think, speak, meditate, and do nothing except for his glory.... We are God's; let us therefore live for him - die for him. We are God's: let his wisdom and will therefore rule all our actions. We are God's; let all the parts of our life accordingly strive toward him as our only lawful goal. O, how much has the man profiteth who, having been taught that he is not his own, has taken away dominion and rule from his own reason that he may yield it to God!

John Calvin
*The Institutes of the Christian Religion*
1559

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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# WHY I'M STILL A PRESBYTERIAN

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
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John 8:31-36
Romans 12:3-13

"For as in one body we have many members . . . so we, who are many, are one body in Christ . . ." (Romans 12:4,5)

*Startle us, O God, with your truth. And remind us that it is your truth and not ours. On this Sunday, as we remember our heritage, remind us that our faith, our religion; our creeds and hymns and rituals, are our poor ways of responding to the mystery of your love and your amazing grace, in Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.*

In the fall of 1959, I walked into the sanctuary of the First Presbyterian Church of Chicago and fell in love. It's a lovely English Gothic building on the corner of Kimbark and 64th Street in the heart of Woodlawn, just a few blocks south of the University of Chicago. I was a student, a more-or-less Presbyterian, Presbyterian by birth, but at that particular time, intentionally unencumbered by religious affiliation. It seemed enough to be reading and thinking about and endlessly discussing the religious thinkers of the day, most of whom didn't have much good to say about the church, by the way. In fact, in those days, it was academically fashionable to disparage the church as an anachronism. The issues that mattered were political integrity, justice, peace, a frightening prospect of new conflict in Southeast Asia, and at home, race relations, the smoldering fires of racial conflict, segregation in the South, discrimination in the North—none of which seemed to have much to do with the church.

The problem was what to do with Sunday morning. Something just didn't feel right to me about sitting at home reading. It was the wife of a friend, who landed a job in the church office, who knew I was a more or less Presbyterian and told me about First Church, and so I visited one Sunday, around this time of year, and fell in love.

It was a big congregation in those days, with lots of people from the University community. I was shocked to see a few professors who weren't very enthusiastic about the institutional church in their classrooms, sitting in the pews, singing hymns, saying prayers, putting money in the plate, looking pretty institutional. It also drew people from the suburbs who were committed to its vision of an interracial church. I had never seen anything like it. Black people and white people, in roughly equal numbers, sitting together in church. Furthermore, the church itself was modeling the vision in a very striking way—it had two ministers—Charles Leber who was white, Ulysses Blakley who was black. They shared responsibilities for preaching and worship leadership. The more I discovered about that church, the more impressed I became. It was involved, deeply, in the neighborhood, which was at the beginning of a radical transformation. It's church

school and youth program reached out to its mostly African American neighborhood children. I signed on as youth director; we learned about racism from wonderful high school students who patiently taught us.

Later, that church would put its life on the line, literally, by inviting the Black Stone Rangers in, allowing the gang to meet in the church, convincing the gang members to deposit their guns in the church safe. The city government and police department took a very dim view of that, raided the church, broke into the safe and confiscated the guns.

Whatever else could be said about First Presbyterian, you couldn't say it was boring, or irrelevant, or uninteresting.

Every Sunday morning I put a collar on and these peculiar bands of cloth and at least part of the reason is that I first saw them when Blakely and Leber wore them in worship at the First Presbyterian Church of Chicago. And part of the reason is that they are called Geneva Tabs because they were worn by the pastors in 16th century Geneva when a man by the name of John Calvin laid the intellectual and institutional foundations for what became Reformed Protestantism, Presbyterianism.

The question is: does any of this matter? Are Protestant denominations important at all any more? This is Reformation Sunday, characterized recently as the day Protestants used to get together and say bad things about Catholics. We had the truth and they didn't. They thought the same thing about us.

Some sociologists of religion are calling it the post-denominational age and we know, for a fact, that American people don't care much about brand name differentiation when it comes to churches. There was a time when denominations helped preserve ethnic identity. Scots were Presbyterian, Episcopalians were English, Lutherans were German and Scandinavian. But the melting pot of American culture dissolved European ethnicity as a meaningful category and denominations took on a social and economic function. In the 1950's, Vance Packard wrote a book, *The Status Seekers*, which observed that religious denominations were a way to place persons in the social hierarchy—"from Pentecostal to Episcopal," Packard called it. Episcopalians owned the company, Presbyterians managed it. Baptists worked for it. That too is gone.

People choose churches for many reasons other than brand name: the music, the architecture, the Sunday School, the variety of programs, the preaching, the parking. Not many choose a church because of its brand name.

A Wall Street Journal writer did a tongue and cheek piece on religious marketing that has become a classic.

> "My strategy," he wrote, "is to consolidate the various name brands, even the strong, flagship brands like Southern Baptists, into one identifiable Exxon-like identity. (He might have said B.P. or Bank One!) The target audience here is Mom, Dad, Butch and Sis—solid, suburban Americans who want a little God in their life and a place to go before brunch. And, after test marketing various possibilities, I

have decided on the name—Middle American Christian Church, or MacChurch, for ad purposes." (Jack Cahill, *Wall Street Journal,* 7/30/85)

These institutions which have been around for 450 years are changing before our eyes. God, I believe, is in the process of creating something new—a new church, I believe, for a new age. And I believe part of the current dilemma of the mainline churches in our culture, the old denominations, is that we're having trouble keeping up with the new thing God is doing and to which God is calling us.

I believe God is doing a new thing with the church—Presbyterian, Lutheran, Methodist, Baptist, Roman Catholic. I believe we are called to be flexible, loose, responsive and, at the same time, I hope we will hold tightly to those particular traditions that produced congregations like this one and the one on the corner of 64th and Kimbark where I fell in love.

It began in the middle of the 16th century, just a few years after an Augustinian Monk by the name of Martin Luther, marched up to the castle church in Wittenberg and nailed 95 theses to the door, outlining what he thought was wrong with the church. Today, we celebrate the 482nd anniversary of that event. The Protestant Reformation exploded in Germany and quickly moved to France and the low countries. A brilliant French lawyer by the name of John Calvin, adopted Reformation theology and became a political refugee fleeing persecution in France. He settled in Geneva and there went to work, thinking, writing, teaching and preaching. In Geneva he produced a brilliant work—which is still studied carefully, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion.*

Calvin was a humanist scholar. His ideas were revolutionary. In church and state, he taught, individuals have the right to participate in their governance; to elect pastors and leaders in church, and magistrates in the city. That was an entirely new way of thinking in an age that assumed that God gave authority to both church and political hierarchies who ruled over everyone in the name of God. In fact, it was revolutionary and sounded a lot like heresy, or treason, which it was. It was the seed-bed for what became the republican form of democracy; individuals blessed with the right to choose their own leaders. The Declaration of Independence reflects that thinking. So does the Constitution and Bill of Rights.

And because individuals have political rights, there are limits on the right of the state—or church—to coerce the conscience of the individual. "God alone is Lord of the conscience," is the way Presbyterians put it, and even though Calvin was responsible for this radical idea of personal liberty, he did not always honor it. When a notorious heretic by the name of Servetus—already condemned to death by the Catholics and Lutherans—came to Geneva, he was arrested and Calvin agreed to his execution by burning—a sobering part of our history. But the heirs of Calvin down through the centuries will be found on the front lines of the struggle for individual political and spiritual liberty—in Nazi Germany, in the American civil rights movement, or the struggle against Apartheid in South Africa.

And because citizens were to be responsible for their own political and ecclesiastical life, education became a priority, not just for the privileged elite, but for every man and woman, every child. Public schools, public education, the responsibility of the whole

community for the education of the children—those are Presbyterian ideas. And so everywhere Presbyterians went, they built schools—in Scotland—along the American frontier. The majority of early colleges and universities in this country were established by Presbyterians, and many of our great public universities were the products of Presbyterian influence—the University of Michigan, University of North Carolina, Georgia, Tennessee, Ohio State, University of California, organized by Presbyterian clergy and laity.

After the Civil War, the states of the former Confederacy were devastated, broke, with industry and agriculture ruined, and in the midst of it all there were several million newly emancipated slaves, most of them unskilled and illiterate. The most urgent need, after food and shelter, was education. It was the Presbyterian Church that responded most aggressively, organizing more than 120 schools in the South to provide basic education to the children of newly emancipated slaves: elementary and secondary schools, Junior Colleges and Colleges. Most of those schools were absorbed in time into public school systems. Many continued into the 20th century. A few survive today—Knoxville, Mary Holmes, Barber-Scotia, Tusculum, Stillman. It was my great privilege, two years ago, to address a Reunion of Reunions of those precious institutions: to witness elderly African American Presbyterians—teachers, doctors, lawyers, business professionals, carrying the old banners of those schools and academies they attended and where they learned that they mattered, that they could live in freedom, could thrive in freedom. It is a great chapter in American Presbyterianism.

And John Calvin believed that it was the role of religion to move out of the church and into the world: that the content of the church's creeds and confession is expressed not only liturgically—inside—but socially and politically and economically. So ours has been the most political of all the religious traditions. In Geneva, Calvin was responsible for the enactment of the first labor laws, regulating child labor. And ever since Presbyterians have been expressing themselves about politics and economics, often to the chagrin of their own members. A Presbyterian minister, and President of the College of New Jersey, John Witherspoon, was the only clergyman to sign the Declaration of Independence.

When the Continental Congress convened in Philadelphia in 1787 to write a constitution, the Presbyterian church was holding it's first General Assembly down the street and several people were delegates to both bodies. The first thing the new General Assembly did was address itself to President Washington.

We've been doing it ever since. John Mulder quips that Presbyterians simply assume that they are responsible for the life of the world—even when the world would prefer that we mind our own business. So every year we look at the world and speak our mind and even when it makes us uncomfortable, even when our own political and economic assumptions are being challenged, it is quintessential Presbyterianism. We believe that the point of the Incarnation was personal—and <u>social</u> transformation: the salvation of individuals and the building of God's new commonwealth on earth.

**And Calvin was ecumenical. From the very beginning, this church has known that it is one part of the Holy Catholic Church of Jesus Christ—not the only part.**

**There is about Presbyterianism a modesty about our truth claims. Perhaps the memory of Calvin's lapse, agreeing to the execution of Servetus, has made us hesitant to claim that ours is the only truth. I'm a Presbyterian because of the awareness that truth is larger than our own understanding of it, or anyone else's, for that matter That idea, that truth is bigger than our version of it is so very fragile, and so absent from much of the religion that captures the attention of the media; the cults, the megachurches, the televangelists, all beating the drum for the absolute truth they know is theirs.**

**Part of the dilemma and pain of our own church at this moment is a deep divide between those who think they know the truth about the mind of God on the subject of sexual orientation and those of us who disagree and dissent and want our church to live a little more humbly, a little more openly; a lot less exclusively. People on both sides of this issue are suggesting openly that it is time to split the church. The head of the Presbyterian Lay Committee, a right wing organization of Presbyterians, is calling for a "bloody holy war" to drive out people who disagree with their position.**

**I'm still a Presbyterian because I believe our church has room for diversity and disagreement on this issue. I believe ultimately, our church will work this out, will change as it has changed its mind about slavery and divorce and the role of women, has changed its mind about what the Bible means. I'm still a Presbyterian because I want my church to hold together as we continue to talk and study and discern, to hold together to be part of the new church God is creating, the new thing God is doing.**

**There is, deep in the heart of Protestantism, and particularly Presbyterianism, a sense of limits, a sense of self-examination and self-criticism, a sense that since God alone is ultimate, nothing else is—not even our very best ideas about God, our very best rules, our best institutional structures—all of it falls under the authority, the judgment, the love and the grace of God. Paul Tillich called that "the Spirit of Protestantism." God alone is ultimate—everything else is open to Reformation.**

**That's what Jesus meant once when he said "You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free," and later, in a variation on that theme, "I am the way, the truth and the life . . ." He, we believe, is the truth: not ideas about him, not creeds written to confess faith in Him, not church hierarchies which claim to represent Him, not ecclesiastical paraphernalia, constitutions, Books of Order, Amendments on this and that, judicial processes.**

**None of it is the truth. He is the truth. He is the truth in whom is peace and wholeness and freedom.**

**That's what Luther meant when he defied the church authorities and the power of the Holy Roman Empire to take his brave stand.**

**It's what John Calvin meant when he wrote those beautiful words:**

> **"I greet thee, who my sure redeemer art,**

My only trust and Savior of my heart . . .No harshness hast Thou and no

bitterness . . .

Our hope is in no other save in Thee"

He is the truth that makes us free.

I'm a Presbyterian because our tradition has remembered that and reminded the rest of the church that He is the truth and then has gone into the world to give its life away, its love, its resources, its knowledge, its heart, its hope, to give its life away.

It happens all over the world wherever there are these peculiar people called Presbyterians.

It happens here—in our tutoring program, at the Center for Whole Life.

It happens in Korea and Cuba and Croatia; in China and Japan and Indonesia; in Edinburgh and Geneva and Paris, in Cairo, Hararwe and Nairobi.

We heard this week from Bob and Dalia Baker, two Presbyterians, members of this congregation, who were touched deeply by the crisis in Kosovo; like two others from Fourth Church, Jack and Joy Houston, who live and work in Guatemala, the Bakers quit their jobs, sold their condominium and volunteered to go—and to somehow help. The Presbyterian Church found a way to put them in the field in a matter of months.

A few weeks ago, a UN worker was killed in Pristina. Then the Kosovo Liberation Army kidnapped three Serbs who haven't been heard from since. Missionary friends of the Bakers were visiting families in the village when this all happened.

This is how Dalia told it:

> "Having said all their good-byes, at ten in the morning, Ellen and Dave and Agim were on the small village road for no more than fifteen minutes when they encountered a roadblock. Almost immediately the doors of their van opened, and they were forcibly pulled out and thrown onto the ground. The attackers were yelling in Serbian. Dave tried to say they were Americans, which infuriated the Serb attackers even more. They kicked them and finally ordered them to get up. At gunpoint, they forced them to walk to a small farmhouse nearby. They were tied and blindfolded. The Serbs began beating them with fists, sticks and electrical cords used as whips. After about five hours, they were all dragged back to the van. Everything was gone: suitcases, money, cameras.
>
> Ellen and Dave have had time to reflect on their experience. Once they were taken from their van, neither of them expected to survive the attack. Dave said he prayed for calmness and endurance. Ellen told me that she prayed for help to control her fear, and that at one point during this ordeal, she suddenly felt a sense of peace. She said that God had sent them to Albania to do work and their work was not finished. God wanted them to finish what they had started."

That's what it means to know the truth that makes us free.

The simple fact that those missionaries are there: that Bob and Dalia Baker, nurtured in this Presbyterian congregation, are there, that our denomination has the machinery and know-how and resources to put them there—where this broken world seems most broken—all that happening at the same time we're wringing our hands about the plight of mainline churches and fighting about this and that—is why, finally, I am still a Presbyterian and always will be.

About our church—about the Bakers—about all of us we might say:

"Through many dangers, toils and snares,

I have already come;

Tis grace has brought me safe thus far,

And grace will lead me home." Amen.